

# Lifestyle Measures to Manage Sleep Apnea

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
Veterans Health Administration

National Center for Patient Safety, Office of Quality and Patient Safety

## Tips to Improve Sleep Apnea

- ▶ **Lose weight.** Even a small weight loss of 5% may have a positive effect and reduce the number of times you stop breathing or have slowed breathing. Being overweight or obese is a major risk factor for sleep apnea. If you do not need to lose weight or find losing weight difficult, try not to gain weight since this can make sleep apnea worse.
- ▶ **Sleep on your side,** not on your back or stomach. It may stop mild sleep apnea. If you tend to roll onto your back, sew a pocket in the back of your pajama top or nightgown. Put a tennis ball into the pocket, and stitch the pocket shut. This will help keep you from sleeping on your back. Special pillows can also be purchased to help maintain a side-sleeping position; however, some of these can move or be tossed on the floor.
- ▶ **Do not use alcohol before bed.** Stop alcohol use at least 2 hours before bed. Alcohol and certain medications, including some pain and sleeping medications, may make sleep apnea worse.
- ▶ **Elevate the head of your bed to a 30-degree angle** or use a pillow wedge if you have a regular mattress. Pillow wedges are available at online retailers and many stores that sell pillows.
- ▶ **Stop smoking.** Smoking can make sleep apnea worse. Talk to your provider or healthcare team about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These can increase your chances of quitting for good.
- ▶ **Exercise regularly.** Even adding a few extra steps each day will be helpful. Consider swimming or a water exercise program. These are particularly helpful for those that are overweight, have reduced mobility, or have difficulty doing traditional exercise programs.
- ▶ **Treat breathing problems,** such as a stuffy nose, caused by a cold or allergies.
- ▶ **Talk with your provider if you take sleep aids.** Some sleep medications may make sleep apnea worse.



## Tips to Improve Sleep

- ▶ **Limit caffeinated beverages** including, coffee, tea, or cola to two or three per day. Caffeine should be avoided after lunchtime.
- ▶ **Go to bed at the same time** and get 7 to 8 hours of sleep on a regular basis. A regular sleep regimen and a full night of sleep can improve sleep and reduce sleep apnea. Not getting enough sleep may worsen sleep apnea.
- ▶ **Avoid using electronic devices in the bedroom.** This includes TV, cell phones, tablets, game systems and computers. The bed should only be used for sleep and intimacy.
- ▶ **Avoid naps.** Naps may make it more difficult to fall asleep at bedtime.
- ▶ **Identify the causes of stress and take steps to manage it.** Consider relaxation techniques or sleep apps that help redirect your thoughts at bedtime.

## Resources

- ▶ National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention (2021). Sleep Well: What's Important to Know? [https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy\\_Living/Sleep\\_Well.asp](https://www.prevention.va.gov/Healthy_Living/Sleep_Well.asp)
- ▶ Patient Education/Information Series: Other Therapies for Sleep Apnea (2015). American Journal of Respiratory Critical Care Medicine, Vol 191, P 1-2. Online version updated March 2019. <https://www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/resources/other-therapies-for-sleep-apnea.pdf>
- ▶ VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Chronic Insomnia Disorder and Obstructive Sleep Apnea (2019). <https://www.healthquality.va.gov/guidelines/CD/insomnia/VADoDSleepCPGPatientSummaryFinal508.pdf>